Ministry Mentors
Serving Those Who Serve

STRENGTHENING PASTORAL MINISTRY
Ministry Mentors Regional Seminar
Held at the Glen Club, Glenview, Illinois
October 25, 2007

A presentation by the Rev. Dr. John M. Buchanan,
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Editor and Publisher, the *Christian Century*

"What a wonderful concept Ministry Mentors is, and what an honor to be part of this [event]. You provide life-giving relationships."

--The Rev. Dr. John Buchanan

Last fall nearly ninety individuals, including pastors, denominational leaders, and guests were privileged to hear the wisdom and wit of John Buchanan, speaking at the Ministry Mentors' seminar, *Strengthening Pastoral Ministry.*

Dr. Buchanan spoke eloquently about the role of the parish pastor, noting the many joys and abundant stresses that make pastoral ministry such a challenging profession.

We are pleased to be able to present his inspirational words to you.

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The keynote address by the Rev. Dr. John M. Buchanan

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One of the books everybody has read and talked about recently is Barbara Brown Taylor's *Leaving Church*. Taylor is an Episcopal Priest, began her ministry in an urban parish in downtown Atlanta; then moved to Grace Calvary Church in the Northern Georgia Mountains: and recently left parish ministry to teach humanities at Piedmont College, a small liberal arts college in Georgia.

She is the author of many books. She has a poet's sense of the Word and words, writes elegantly, speaks even more elegantly. She speaks, preaches, lectures at every important conference in the land it seems. She is certainly one of my mentors – along with thousands of others.

So why in the world did she leave? And write a book about it with a picture on the book jacket of a white dove flying out of a bird cage with the door wide open – as if ministry – her ministry at least – became a kind of captivity? She's a good friend, and I mean to ask her about that book jacket sometime – although I suspect I know the answer and it is that her ministry in the parish became a kind of captivity. And that one of the reasons for this organization, Ministry Mentors, and this event today is to do something to prevent that – life in a bird cage with the door tightly locked to stay healthy and reasonably happy.

I suppose we've all thought about it at one time or another – life outside. And I suppose many if not most of us have decided to be a minister not once, but many times.

For one thing – there is the Church, the institution with all its creaky structures to maintain and elaborate paraphernalia. Many of us spent a fair amount of our preparation for ministry critiquing what we loved to call the "Institutional Church" as if there were any other kind except in the heart and imagination of God. And then we got into it, served on judicatory committees, task forces, attended meetings, rubbed shoulders with other people, some of whom, amazingly, had spent their entire ministries inside the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. And then we got caught up in one of the

great divisive issues of the day, homosexuality, for instance, and whether the Church should ordain gay and lesbian Christians who know themselves called by God to service, and it wore us out and broke our heart, just about the time the old creaky structures appeared to be literally coming apart.

It's the easiest target in the world, the Church is. It always has been. Among human institutions, and whether or not you believe God has something to do with it, calls it into being, nurtures, inspires and protects it, the Church is also human – utterly, sinfully human.

And now, to make matters worse, the sociologists are assuring us that modern — or postmodern — religion is not only post denominational, maybe post Christian, but also an entirely individual matter, not institutional at all. We are a nation of "Seekers" not "Joiners" Wade Clark Roof taught us. Spirituality is where it's at — as the Religion and Philosophy department at Borders testifies — a private, personal quest for meaning, purpose, happiness, God, that has nothing to do with church. When Jennifer brings Kevin to my study to plan the wedding he tells me, "I'm spiritual — very spiritual . . . I'm just not religious, haven't been in church for years." When the family gathers to plan Bill's Memorial Service, four post modern young adults, successful, affluent, they say, without embarrassment, "We'd like to keep
this religious stuff to a minimum, Reverend," by which they mean stuff like hymns, scripture, prayers. What they want is three tributes and music by Eric Clapton — "a send off for Dad," and the relationship to the institution is only as the hall they've rented to do it in.

Nobody, however, is more critical of church than people who love it, work in it, serve in it — have high hopes for it — have a life-long lover's quarrel with it.

Author Annie Dillard, baptized a Presbyterian, now a Roman Catholic . . . "What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ came the Christians (The Church). Who can believe in them?" (*Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, ed. Alfred Corn, p. 36).

Will Willimon, parish pastor, Duke Chaplain, now a Methodist Bishop, "Jesus has many admirers who feel he married beneath his station. They love Christ but are unable to love those whom he loved . . . For most of us the church is an embarrassment" (*What's Right with the Church*, p. 3).

Bill Gates, richest man in the world and thus granted instant status as a profoundly wise man as well: "Just in terms of the allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on Sunday morning."

For what it's worth, I think those of us who have elected to stay and not leave have the opportunity to be part of one of the great transitions in Christian history. In his recent book, *Secrets in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner says: "Maybe the best thing that could happen to the church would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash it all away — the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, church bulletins blowing through the air like dried leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too" (p. 153).

Sometimes it feels like that is exactly what is happening.

What I am most weary of is our propensity to blame someone for the decline in numbers and status, of particularly mainline churches. The far right in my church has made a cottage industry out of the politics of blame — it's the liberals, liberalism — while, on our side of it, we think maybe they're to blame. Nobody's to blame. The old mainline churches are caught in the midst of huge demographic change — with thousands of parishes in cities and neighborhoods where there are fewer and fewer Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians. The town in which I grew up — Altoona, Pennsylvania, a railroad town of 85,000 when the Pennsylvania Railroad employed between 15,000 and 20,000 people: used to have seven thriving Presbyterian churches. The Railroad left: the population dropped by 40%. So did church membership. Now there are three Presbyterian churches.

What are we to do — those of us who elect to stay and who still love these creaky old structures? Well, for one thing we need to stop exaggerating the trouble we're in. Martin Marty reminds us that we no longer run the show in this nation, as we once did, and one of the reasons is that the "show" itself has radically changed. But, Marty says, we are still a critically important part of the national landscape. It is in churches like ours that the world sees a religion not afraid of critical thinking, not afraid to engage science-dialogically, and the arts and the great issues of the day. It is in churches that the world sees occasionally a religion of hospitality and love and inclusivity: a counterpoint to the religion the media seems to favor, a religion of exclusivity, and violence, verbal if not physical.

It is in churches that the world sees occasionally a radical alternative to the market economy that reduces everything, even religion, to the terms of the market, discovering what the consumers want and giving it to them: a radical alternative to the enormously popular "An awesome God wants you to be rich and successful."

It is in churches like ours that the world occasionally sees a religion that takes God's world seriously, the good but fragile and endangered creation: a religion that refuses to reduce human values to abortion and

same sex marriages, a religion that has not forgotten its own prophetic tradition and continues to witness to a God of justice and peace.

I am cheered by Walter Brueggemann's conclusion that we may be headed for a kind of exile, may already be there — those of us in the old mainline Protestant denomination. Great scholar that he is, Walter also reminds us that exile is not necessarily a bad place to be; that when God's people are in exile they become creative, energetic, nimble, brave, faithful and even, on occasion, joyful.

Leading these congregations of ours into the future will require us to be smart and perceptive and understanding of the new world in which we find ourselves: and brave enough to do and try new things: and one thing more, faithful enough to remind ourselves and one another on occasion, that this business is not in our hands alone. Buechner proposed that maybe the best thing that could happen would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash it all away — but then he caught me, as he so consistently does, with this — "Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which is all there was in the first place."

Whenever I'm about to give up on the old institution, something always seems to happen to remind me that all we have is each other — and Christ.

Let me tell you about Glen Fenema. Glen had AIDS and died a few years ago. Glen loved the church even though parts of it were not very accepting of him. In spite of that, he was in worship every Sunday and participated in the life of the congregation as long as he was able. I keep a picture of him as a reminder of what he taught me about the church and about why we're in this business still.

When he could no longer make it to worship Glen listened to the Sunday morning service on tape, then CD. Near the end he was in a hospice facility. On one of my last visits we talked — with more depth than ever before — about his life and about what was happening to him — his dying. I asked him: "What's the hardest part of this?" He told me that the hardest part was at nighttime, trying to fall asleep. He was so sick, and at night when all the guests and his family had gone and the lights were down and the place was quiet, he felt alone with his pain and weakness and the knowledge that he was dying. "You know what I do?" he said. "I put a CD in the player and listen to a Sunday service. I must have hundreds of them. It settles me down. Sometimes I fall asleep right away during the Prelude. Often I fall asleep during your sermons — I'm not the only one to do that," he added. "But every night I go to sleep like that, here in my bed, but also in my church."

That's why I'm not leaving.

Not only that, but part of what I've learned in more than four decades is how to survive in this job and actually love it. And my assumption is that part of the reason you have invited me to be with you — an enterprise that calls itself "Ministry Mentors" — is for me to try to pass on anything helpful I've learned.

It's a risky business, ministry is. A friend of mine, Eileen Lindner, in a new book, *Thus Far on the Way: Toward a Theology of Child Advocacy*, she tells a story about the day she wore her new pulpit robe for the first time:

> "When I was ordained some thirty years ago very few women were ordained in the Presbyterian church. The pulpit robe company didn't make women's pulpit robes so my home church had a robe made for me. Anyway, it was Christmastime. I wore my fancy robe (for the first time). I was a little full of myself. It was an Advent service and we had an Advent wreath. I called a young girl to light the candles in the Advent wreath, and I did what pastors do. I gave her exceedingly exact directions. I said to her: "When the time comes, I'll nod. You come down, light the candle, then turn, blow out the match without blowing out the candle, and go sit down."
>
> The time came. "I nodded, she came down and did exactly as I told her, and as I moved over to the Advent wreath, she said in a very clear voice, 'Careful, Reverend, don't set your bathrobe on fire.'"

Eileen says being a minister is to live and work close to the flames — close to the heat and passion and tragedy and exultation, close to pain and loss as well as unbelievable joy, of human life. People invite us into their lives at a level accessible to no one else. They tell us things they tell no one else, things we must never tell — even our spouses: things we carry around in our hearts all our lives. They call us when they lose their job or when a spouse dies. They come see us to tell us sex is no longer interesting; they come to announce that they can't believe in God: that their teenager is doing cocaine. They come to us to bury their dead and marry their children. They expect us to spend Friday night at the rehearsal party — trying to look interested as one fraternity brother after another, under the influence of free booze stands up and describes the sexual exploits of the groom in far more detail than anyone really wants to know, followed by a series of sorority sisters, not to be outdone by the guys, telling us that the bride is no slouch either. They want us and we need to be there through most of the next day — Saturday — the biggest day in their lives: the service, the endless wait while the photographer goes to work because they want you in

your robe in the last one, then the cocktail party and reception dinner where you find yourself seated beside Aunt Gertrude from Vermont who is hard of hearing.

They want us to be by their hospital beds when they or their loved ones are critically ill: they invite us into that most intimate space in all of human life — the time when it comes to an end. In Richard Lischer's wonderful memoir, *Open Secrets*, he describes a situation we have all been in: drives 50 miles to a critical care facility to say a prayer over a comatose patient. "Who sees this act and calls it good?" Lischer asks.

They tell us they love our preaching so much they turn us into addicts, hooked on post worship compliments: and they devastate us with criticism just when we are most vulnerable. They scold us for not condemning the war more forcefully and for criticizing the President. They email us that they're canceling their pledge because of what we said, or didn't say, about homosexuality: or they've decided to transfer to another church (they mean preacher) because they find so profoundly distasteful this or that.

They watch our families and discuss our compensation. They know what kind of car we drive and where we go on vacation.

And, remarkably, they not only allow us into their lives, they come week after week and sit quietly and listen to us talk. If there is a more astonishing fact and a more unlikely honor than that — I don't know what it might be.

Describing her struggle with the decision to become a priest, Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

> "Being a priest seemed only slightly less dicey to me than being chief engineer at a nuclear plant. In both cases, one needed to know how to approach great power without loosing great danger and getting fried in the process."

And so — some thoughts on how to do it without setting your robe on fire — or getting fried in the nuclear meltdown.

There is so much literature on the topic, some helpful, some trivial. I've read much of it, endorsed some of it. I expect you've poured over it, too, hoping finally to learn how to do this thing you've been doing now for decades. I offer my thoughts this morning, knowing that each of us in our own way has learned not by reading, but by watching someone else do it and then doing it which, after all, is the only way we learn anything. Law and medicine make sure mentoring happens — residents watch, then imitate, law clerks watch then practice.

There are different ways of mentoring and being mentored.

The best way is to find someone who knows how to do it — and ask him or her to help.

Ministry Mentors offers a structural way to do that.

The unofficial way is to watch someone who does it well and then imitate him or her. That's how we learn to preach, I think — we listen to good preachers, read good preacher sermons: listen to good communicators, watch how they do it — and then imitate. I call it "silent apprenticing." For me — Ernie Campbell at Riverside Church was a mentor, years before I met him.

At the heart of surviving and loving ministry is time management and sermon preparation. The principle is doing the most important thing first, seeing that the most important thing receives your best attention, your best physical, mental and emotional resources.

I also recommend something like that system because it allows for self care.

It has liberated me from what I think is the worst possible circumstance, and that is waiting 'til Saturday, or worse yet, Saturday night. I've done it a few times and hated it. So did my wife.

Under the heading of keeping healthy for me has meant trying to live a normal life: Saturday is for family, errands, ball games and picnics. Saturday night is for drinks and dinner and a movie maybe, not sermon writing.

One thing for sure in this business is that the work is never done. There is always one more person to see, one more telephone call to make, one more program to organize and supervise, one more class to teach, and if you're not careful you can literally work yourself to death. Barbara Brown Taylor said that parish ministry is a prescription for burnout and then left. It's much better now, but being a sole pastor can be a killer: all those evening meetings, sometimes every evening of the week and when there was a free one scheduling a home visit; working all day, home for a quick dinner, play with the kids, give a few baths, then out the door to the Stewardship Committee, the Board of Deacons — every organization because you're the only staff person, then dragging home at 9 or 9:30 p.m. exhausted. In that context a designated and inviolable day off, a Sabbath for you and your spouse — is an absolute necessity.

And it helps to establish boundaries and to learn to say "no." Early on I decided that my kids would not be "Preacher's Kids — PKs" — how I dislike that term. They would be our children. After years of missing important one-time events in their lives, I stopped, woke up and realized what I was doing. I began saying, "I'll have to leave this meeting at 4:00 because my son is playing basketball."

Finally, do take care of yourself. We work hard and long. Take care of your spirit. Feed your soul. A concert, a play, the ballet, a movie, a baseball game is an integral necessity, a priority to tend to your own hunger.

Take care of your body — so very important. We are whole beings. Exercise — regularly, jog, walk, bike, swim — several times a week, daily if possible.

Take care of your relationships. It is so easy to neglect, to push aside, and overlook — the most precious gift God gives — someone to love and care for.

Thank you for listening to all of this — for allowing me to reflect on it all.

There is so much to love — and as I near the time to retire — I find myself loving with a new clarity and a new affection — and a new sense of the great privilege of it.

I began with Barbara Brown Taylor and so it is appropriate to close with a few words from *Leaving Church*:

> "When people ask me what I miss most about serving a church, the answer is this: I miss baptisms and funerals, parish picnics and hospital calls (I miss the children, after worship, hugging my knees as I greet their parents), but what I miss most is celebrating communion with people I love. Most of us do not live especially holy lives, after all. We spend most of our time sitting in traffic, paying bills and being irritated with one another. Yet every week we are invited to stop all that for an hour at least. We are invited to participate in a great drama that has been going on without us for thousands of years, and one that will go on as long as there is a single player left standing."

What a privilege. What a blessing.

Thank you for listening to me.

John Buchanan's insights appear regularly in the "Editor's Desk" column that appears in each issue of the *Christian Century*, www.christiancentury.org.